

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 9

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of April 18, 1955

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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription \$25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, INC., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Champagne Complex"

The New York Times

April 13, 1955

Theatre: A Thin Farce

'Champagne Complex' Arrives at the Cort

By BROOKS ATKINSON

LESLIE STEVENS, author of last year's "Bullfight," has now written a thin farce with a bright surface, "Champagne Complex," which was acted at the Cort Tuesday evening.

In recognition of the realities he calls it "a light-headed farce." The total population is limited to three characters—a pompous young man of the upper classes, his fiancée who gets abnormally tight on a few glasses of champagne, and his uncle who is also a psychoanalyst and tries to simplify her complex—in a nice way, of course.

Like "Bullfight," "Champagne Complex" indicates that

Mr. Stevens is a theatre writer. The dialogue is bright. It is not only funny, but it has taste. Although Mr. Stevens is a young writer, he does not have to imitate anyone else. He has a fresh and civilized style of his own. In the case of the pompous young man, he has a sense of caricature. For Helms Fell Harper—he always uses the full name, particularly over the telephone—is a neatly drawn character, recognizable in his assurance, very funny in his querulous conventionality. If Mr. Stevens can portray a character as vividly and shrewdly as Helms Fell Harper, he can write a keener comedy than "Champagne Complex."

For no matter how entertaining it is on the surface, you can hardly escape noticing that nothing much happens. And that, with only three characters to call the tune, the conclusion is pre-

ordained. Why does the fiancée invariably start pulling off her clothes when she has a snootful of champagne? She is not really in love with Helms Fell Harper. If not with him, with whom? Well, there's only one other character. Note that the middle-aged man triumphs over the young blade. Young men are second-class citizens in the modern theatre.

Under Michael Gordon's direction, "Champagne Complex" is amusingly acted. Charles Elson, scene designer, has contributed a warm, gay top-floor apartment with some household conveniences that have a satiric value of their own. As the complicated young lady, Polly Bergen gives a lively performance with infectious good humor.

John Dall is just about perfect as Helms Fell Harper—aggressively dull, chuckle-headed, stupidly gallant. As the analyst, Donald Cook is immensely entertaining. He is a very resourceful farceur, who never misses a point, but never makes it too obvious. There is nothing funnier in the play than his first scene when, suffering from an unprofessional

"CHAMPAGNE COMPLEX"

Farce by Leslie Stevens; staged by Michael Gordon; production designed by Charles Elson; presented by Gayle Stine at the Cort Theatre, April 12, 1955. The cast: Helms Fell Harper..... John Dall Allyn Macy..... Polly Bergen Carter Brown..... Donald Cook

hang-over, he tries to grapple with the psychological problems of a new patient who bores him.

For there is a lot of amusing stuff in "Champagne Complex." There is also plenty of evidence that Mr. Stevens is a first-rate writer who can be funny without being cheap or imitative. But there is not quite enough material for a full evening. When the play is over, the champagne tastes flat.

Journal  American

April 13, 1955

New Stevens Farce Is a Funny Show

By JOHN McCLAIN

SO YOU LAUGH—you can't help it. You laugh at contrived situations coming out of the merest thread of a plot; you laugh at routines that are dragged in by their long grey beards, and lines that are sometimes embarrassingly obvious. But the fact remains that "Champagne Complex," which opened at the Cort last night, is a funny show.

Leslie Stevens, who made a serious start last season with "Bullfight," has here turned to the most blatant farce in the modern manner. He has taken a single one-joke gag and parlayed it into an evening.

There are long lulls, there are implausible story situations, and there is every comedy gimmick seen in these parts for the past few seasons. But somehow it has been strung together rather pleasantly and, thanks to the engaging

services of the three principals, results in a hilarious and disjointed excursion toward exactly nowhere.

Great Adversity

It appears that Polly Bergen is engaged to "the youngest vice president in the U. S.," a striving and stuffy young man played by John Dall. But she has developed a distressing complex: whenever she drinks champagne she has an uncon-

trollable desire to take her clothes off.

In this great adversity Mr. Dall persuades his fiancée to allow his uncle, an amateur psychiatrist, played by Donald Cook, to come to her mental aid. You wouldn't believe it, but she falls in love with Mr. Cook.

This of course provides a suitable pattern for all manner of familiar and fool-proof interludes. There is the analysis scene, the drunk scene, several variations of the lover-in-the-closet routine, and the smash finish in which the muscle-bound youth is unable to lay a glove on his suave and nimble rival.

There are also prolonged preoccupations with the telephone as a means of plot pro-

gression, there is a dog named "T. S. Eliot" and endless expansion along the lines of "Oh, T. S. always sleeps with me"; there is even a curtain line, "Sleep tight—that is, sleep sober."

Comical Lines

But there also are many extremely comical lines, and Donald Cook, who is always funny for me, is even funnier. Polly Bergen, making her bow to Broadway in a non-singing role, is excessively decorative and exhibits (along with large unadorned areas) distinct promise as a comedienne. John Dall is suitably obnoxious as the pompous young executive.

Michael Gordon, the director seems to have kept the tempo alive and attempted to refresh some of the fading moments with original charades. Charles Elson has provided a one-set apartment, complete with doorbell that rings "Dum-de-dum-dum," like "Dragnet," and a dining room table that unfolds from the bedroom door. It is all very functional.

So, in a strange way, is "Champagne Complex." It doesn't make much sense, but it serves as a suitable vehicle for a lot of fun. I think you'll be amused.

"The Champagne Complex"—continued

Daily Mirror

April 13, 1955

'Champagne Complex' Is Sparkling, Then Flat

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In one of the annual polls, we picked Leslie Stevens as the most promising playwright of last season. That was on the strength of an initial script called "Bullfight." And we are still of the opinion that he has the talent to do big things on Broadway.

THIS, despite his second effort, "Champagne Complex," which Gayle Stine brought to the Cort Theatre Tuesday evening. For if "Bullfight" was imaginative and colorful, had integrity and depth, the new arrival shows a development in facility and technical command of the stage.

So when Stevens uses his newly acquired dramatic skill

on a subject worthy of it, the result should be something to cheer. At present, however, he has merely sharpened his craftsmanship on "a lightheaded farce." It's a bubble that soars buoyantly for about an act-and-a-half, and then slowly sinks down to the boards.

It just runs out of gas. Its three characters are expertly

etched. There are some clever lines that garner robust laughs. But it's all surface and no heart. It harps on one joke for a whole evening, and it gets a little tiresome toward the end. After all, the Restorationists didn't have heart, either, but they had resource and brilliance.

"CHAMPAGNE COMPLEX" is a case of boy gets girl, boy loses girl and—surprise—aging psychiatrist gets girl. Come to think of it, it's not so surprising at that. For the boy is a stuffed shirt, and the mental maestro is a human and likable fellow.

As for the girl, she developed a complex for champagne, after discovering that she wasn't really in love with the dull, budding executive she was engaged to marry. So the bubbly was her release, her way out. And when she was under its influence, there was the temptation to emulate a strip teaser. That's always an enticing idea to toss into a sexy farce.

Under Michael Gordon's direction, Donald Cook, Polly Bergen and John Dall act the daylights out of the chuckle provoker. Cook is a wizard at timing, at wringing laughs from relatively unprofitable dialogue and situations.

WE'VE ONLY KNOWN Miss Bergen as a songstress with bands and the late John Murray Anderson's "Almanac." But in the current instance, she serves notice that she's to be reckoned with in the future as a legit comedienne. She has looks, charm, and comedy savvy. Dall, a solid trouper, is properly stiff as a business stiff.

"Champagne Complex," in sum, is an exercise in dramatic carpentry by one of our better young playwrights. From it, he has doubtless learned a lot, and, we predict, the theatre will be the better for it one of these days.

DAILY NEWS

April 13, 1955

'Champagne Complex' Slim Farce

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I don't imagine most of us have really listened to the sound of a triangle since Joe Cook last activated Dave Chasen by dumping a hopper of rocks on his head. This would activate Dave at precisely the right moment in a musical piece and he would let go a dainty blow on his triangle. This "ping" was a shimmering, cheerful little sound, but it was thin—and Leslie Stevens' three-character farce, "Champagne Complex," is a ping from the old sex triangle. As it

was played last evening at the Cort Theatre, it shimmers and is cheerful, but it is short on volume.

Much of the shimmer comes

from the playing of Donald Cook, one of our really sophisticated comedians, and Polly Bergen, who is a gifted and lovely young lady. With the help of John Dall as the fall guy and with nicely light-minded direction by Michael Gordon, Cook and Bergen get all that one could hope for from the Stevens script.

She Takes 'Em Off

Of its kind, it is a good script—intelligent, well-mannered, often funny and occasionally witty. It relates that Dall, a rich young stuffed shirt, is engaged to Miss Bergen, who is a researcher for Fortune Magazine and therefore intelligent, natch. One thing worries the lad, though: Whenever the girl gets a cupful of champagne under her 22-inch belt she has a tendency to take off her belt and almost everything else, stopping only at her polka-dotted undies.

So the boy friend calls in his uncle, Mr. Cook, who is a gentleman amateur psychoanalyst, to cure the wench of this foolish habit. Five minutes after last night's curtain went up I would have bet you four dollars and seventy-five cents that Uncle Donald was going to take pretty Polly right away from Honest John—and I'd have won, too, if you'd been silly enough to bet against me.

Author Stevens has some funny notions about all three of his characters, the most fetching of whom is the girl. She has a shaggy dog named T. S. Eliot which she lowers out of the window of her fourth-floor walkup in a basket when it is time for the little monster to go visit a tree. She also has an ivy plant named Eddie. Ivy, she explains, is a girl's name.

It's all quite pleasant, and is played in a handsome and humorous setting by Charles Elson. It is the first ping of spring.

Herald Tribune

April 13, 1955

'Champagne Complex'

By WALTER F. KERR

In the new evening at the Cort, there is a bedroom door that turns into a china closet, a blowsy dog named T. S. Eliot, and a male garden plant that is frequently addressed as Edward. All of these are supported by a very small play.

Leslie Stevens, who came to decidedly favorable attention last season with his serious and inventive "Bullfight," has here chosen to tangle with "light-headed" comedy. He hasn't been as cagy as a young writer might

be, though. Instead of wrapping his repartee around a reasonably strong plot, and counting on farce momentum to see him over

the hurdles, he has staked the enterprise on glibness alone. This is a trick that older, wearier and infinitely wiser masters are not always able to bring off. Though "Champagne Complex" has its undeniably bright moments, it often stammers in its eagerness to make every line a gem. And when the lines don't turn out to be gems,

it just stands still making motions.

Not that you'll notice much of anything wrong while Donald Cook is on stage. Mr. Cook, who is accurately described as looking "like a back issue of Esquire," plays a lay psychiatrist—I'm dipping into the play's treasury of jokes for that last phrase—who is called upon to straighten out his nephew's fiancée. The girl has fallen into a habit of ripping off all her clothes the moment she touches champagne, and it is Mr. Cook's pleasant task to find out why.

In the course of his investigations, Mr. Cook gasps for air (the girl's apartment is well above sea level), squints through a hangover, does terrifying things to his neck muscles as he forces down coffee with a

trace of cinnamon in it, and demonstrates some of the niceties of figure-skating. But this sort of elaboration—superbly timed though it is—does not exhaust the actor's capacities. He is even more valuable when he is doing practically nothing, or when he hasn't been given an epigram to chortle over. He often freezes every nerve, for instance, and stares into space as though he had just gone into shock. (Anything he says immediately afterward is automatically funny). He sometimes simply stares at the furniture, as though it fascinates him. This is funny, too, especially when someone else is talking—and not too brilliantly. He lifts a line into laughter with a sneer that is only an afterthought, and he is very good at blurring a weak bon mot into an extended, slightly manic, bruhaha. Mr.

"The Champagne Complex"—continued

Cook doesn't exactly need dialogue. He only needs a little space to wander in, and not too many other actors to get in his way.

In point of fact, there are only two other actors in "Champagne Complex." Pretty Polly Bergen is the girl, and she is a trim, modest performer with an attractively misty voice. John Dall is the young man who has been socially embarrassed by her

becoming misconduct; he sputters, squeaks and makes pompous demands with great aplomb. Neither Miss Bergen nor Mr. Dall, however, has quite the inspiration to fill in around the edges, and when their author slackens up a bit they are forced to flail.

There are pleasant passages in Mr. Stevens' improvisation; there are a couple of sessions—on the couch, or taking ink-blot

tests—that build to open, or almost open, hilarity. What does the author in, I think, is his student-like reliance on a couple of formulas he has overheard. He is very fond of run-on catalogues ("He's young, handsome, has extra wisdom teeth," and so on), and he is passionately addicted to an end-of-the-line reverse (Well, of course not, never, no—that is, yes"). After a time you get to reciting some of these with him and he rarely

fools you. A certain ebullient spirit is present; but the technical variety that might keep a slender jest jumping is not yet Mr. Stevens' to command.

The Charles Elson upstairs apartment is not only attractive as a piece of brick-wall and skylight design, it is likely—in its gadgets—to interest any housewife you care to name. And Michael Gordon has directed with an easy, glossy, unforced hand.

New York Post

April 13, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Slight Play With Three Actors

There are a few pleasant things to be said immediately about "Champagne Complex." For one, Leslie Stevens, its author, has frankly and disarmingly called his play a "farce," which is an honorable branch of theater writing, instead of trying to pretend it is anything else. For a second, it has the advantage of an immensely deft and skillful performance by Donald Cook, an actor who really knows his job. Third, and perhaps rather specially, it has the virtue for an aging drama critic of showing the older man winning the beautiful girl from the younger one.

At the Cort Theater last night, where the play by the promising author of the admired "Bullfight" of a season ago had its first local performance, it was the presence of Mr. Cook that seemed the most important of these blessings. The truth is that "Champagne Complex," despite some amusing lines, hasn't quite the inventiveness or artfulness to keep its light three-character narrative spinning consistently in the air. But Mr. Cook has so much skill at such matters that he makes it seem gay and even witty for a surprising amount of the time.

The Psychiatrist

It is the sort of achievement that he accomplished in another and far better play with few characters called "The Moon Is Blue." Again Mr. Cook is frankly mannered, stylized and not concerned with being excessively realistic. His is very unashamedly a performance. But he manages everything with so much vitality and artful comic imagination that he can make fair lines humorous and good ones hilarious, and he transforms the character of a psychiatrist who steals the girl patient from his nephew into an engaging figure of debonair wit.

No one could call "Champagne Complex" a play with surprises. You have only to see the stuffy fiancé of the beautiful young woman addicted to taking off her clothes when she has had a drink

of champagne to know that he is making a mistake in calling in his dashing uncle to cure her of her complex. It must be said of Mr. Stevens that he isn't trying for unexpected twists. But his attenuated story demands a consistent stream of comic freshness to keep it going, and there isn't enough of it for an entire evening.

The Gobel Era

Perhaps it is an extraneous matter, but I think it is possible that the one historic feature of "Champagne Complex" is that it is the first play which can be described to the George Gobel era. At least, there is a knowing reference in the opening act to the most famous of the new television comics, and, shortly afterward, there is a line that can have a meaning only to those familiar with the household catch phrases of this Mr. Gobel. Outside of that, it is all fairly familiar, even in its frequent brightness.

When I say the heroine is a beautiful girl I'm not exaggerating, because she is played by the highly pictorial Polly Bergen, chiefly known to audiences as a singer. Miss Bergen doesn't bother too much with giving a deftly comic performance, but her acting is forthright and likable. The stuffy and beaten-from-the-start fiancé is pleasantly played by John Dall, whose most triumphant moment consists of tearing a telephone book in two. It is entertaining to watch Mr. Cook in action, but "Champagne Complex" is only intermittent fun.



New York World-Telegram

and The Sun

April 13, 1955

The Complex Called Champagne

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Champagne Complex" is a three-character, three-act play, acted at the Cort in the manner of a farce.

The story is transparent, the characterizations are uninventive. The whole evening is spent working up to one gag. It is so talked over by the time it occurs, that nobody could make it very captivating.

The title refers to the mood which strikes a young lady when she drinks champagne.

A couple of sips and she is snatching off her clothes with as much zest as if she were on a Union City runway being paid for it.

Her fiancé is a puritanical baby tycoon. His uncle is a charming psychiatrist.

Nobody should expect suspense after hearing that.

An endless amount of talk launches the heroine's Piper Heidsieck-inspired strip at the end of the second act.

The third act offers a fake repeat of this divestment bit. As you may have guessed, the purpose of the phony strip is to shock the fiancé out of the competition.

Good Comic Timing.

It is horrifying to think what "Champagne Complex" would be without Donald Cook. It is not easy to describe it with him, in his absence it would be calamitous.

Cook plays the head doctor, with frequent flashes of unmatchable comic timing. His original entrance, hung over as a Ruth Roland serial, muttering for water, is a moment to treasure.

After that he has, here and there, the chance to reiterate that nobody else can make more of alarm or contempt or pain, as a conveyance for hilarity, than he can.

Cute Gal.

Polly Bergen, songbird, plays the bubble-loving heroine. Miss Bergen is attractive and plays with a wealth of bravado. She simply has not the experience or resource to hold the stage so incessantly.

The net impression she gives is of a cute girl saying lines too fast and running short distances with unnaturally short steps.

John Dall is the prodigious businessman. It is a thankless part, the prudish lover rejecting a lady's advances. Dall makes the character inoffensive and believable, if not devastatingly charming.

"3 for Tonight"

DAILY NEWS

April 7, 1955

The Dancing Champions Highlight A Delightful Show, '3 for Tonight'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

One of the pleasantest ways I can think of to spend an evening on the town is to drop in at the Plymouth Theatre and see Paul Gregory's new divertissement, "3 for Tonight."

Even though the ticket problem will be the same old aggravation and you may have to plan a bit ahead, I "drop in" purposely, to indicate that the show should be taken in the spirit in which it is offered—which is casually and light-heartedly.

The attractions presented are modest—a couple of dancers, a singer, a talker and a four-piece band. Happily, they are among the best, being Marge and Gower Champion, Harry Belafonte, Hiram Sherman, the Voices of Walter Schumann and four gentlemen who play the piano, the gutbucket, the drums and an assortment of woodwinds. Put them all together and you have something that is smooth, well-mannered and quite delightful.

Like the Astaires

Marge Champion who, with her husband Gower, is not unknown to TV viewers, made her Broadway de-

but at the Plymouth last evening, and she captured what is left of my stony old heart. She is a pixy, a doll and a darling. Last evening, when she and Gower were circling the stage in a lovely soft-shoe number, my memory took me back to the impish gaiety and stylish grace of Fred and Adele Astaire. Seen "live," the Champions are wonderful dancers.

Just as effective in his own style is Belafonte, who sings again the "Mark Twain" song which brought him to attention in the last "John Murray Anderson's Almanac." Belafonte has a fine variety of folk songs and spirituals, and he makes an art of the way he sings them. Very few people, including our best actors, can talk English as well as he can sing it.

Schumann's vocal and instrumental arrangements are far above

the ordinary in imagination and effectiveness, and his chorus of a dozen men and eight girls is flawless, whether it is singing a rousing "It Couldn't Be a Better Day" or a sentimental "Shine On, Harvest Moon."

Cherubic M. C.

Putting this little show together—and there isn't much to put together, for there is no scenery and the only props are bar stools for the singers—is Hiram Sherman, an ageless cherub who talks blandly about what is going on and finally manages to stir himself up enough to join the Champions in a bit of a soft-shoe turn. He's just the right sort of chap for this kind of evening.

I do have one complaint and it won't make any difference to producer Gregory. Gregory is microphone-crazy. Has 'em hanging all over the stage, and uses them all the time in an intimate theatre where none is necessary. I'll grant that once in a while a mike and the very good loudspeaker system are useful—to carry the beat of a met-

"3 FOR TONIGHT"

A diversion in song and dance with lyrics and special material by Robert Wells; original music by Walter Schumann; arrangements by Nathan Scott; conducted by Richard Pribor; staged by Gower Champion; presented by Paul Gregory and Charles Laugh-ton at the Plymouth Theatre, April 6, 1955, with the following cast: Marge and Gower Champion, Harry Belafonte, the Voices of Walter Schumann, Hiram Sherman and Betty Benson.

ronome for a dance number, for instance, or to pick up Belafonte when he is whispering a lament—but continuous use of them makes me think I am listening to a hi-fi recording rather than a living theatre performance. But Papa Gregory must know best. He has made more money out of mikes in three or four years than Graham McNamee and Floyd Gibbons made in their lifetimes.

However, Marge Champion doesn't need a mike. She's got her Gower.

New York Post

April 7, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Bright Evening of Song and Dance

Having a gift for imaginative showmanship and a great contempt for scenery, Paul Gregory, producer of "Don Juan in Hell," "John Brown's Body" and "The Caine Mutiny Court Martial," now offers an attractive concert-type entertainment which he accurately describes as "a diversion in song and dance." Since the new show has as its major performers Marge and Gower Champion and Harry Belafonte, the name given it is "3 For Tonight," under which title it had what struck me as a highly successful premiere at the Plymouth Theater last night.

Actually, the title isn't altogether apt. This is by no means to deny the excellence of the dancing Champions and the singing Mr. Belafonte, but there is also present a choral group known as the "voices" of Walter Schumann, and they are quite a delight.

Singing is probably the chief interest of this versatile score or so of young men and women, but they can likewise dance, make sounds like various musical instruments and help out with the comedy occasionally. "3 For Tonight" owes much of its interest to the varied talents of the "voices."

Hiram Sherman

Then there is Hiram Sherman. Sensible people in this vicinity have known for years that the bland Mr. Sherman is not only a quiet comedian of exceptional

talent and originality but just about the best all-around master of ceremonies extant. Chiefly, his task in "3 For Tonight" is to introduce and comment on the proceedings from time to time, which he does with his customary, casual expertness. At one point he even engages in dance with the Champions, and it would have pleased me if he had been given a chance for additional activities.

But it isn't my intention to slight the three stars. It is no secret to moviegoers, or even to this reviewer who is but occasionally a moviegoer, that the Champions are a most delightful pair of dancers. They have a number of gay and imaginative terpsichorean enterprises to perform, and they do them with humor, freshness, grace and enormously winning skill. I enjoyed and admired both of them unfailingly last night, and I became a particular fan of Marge Champion, who, in addition to her dancing, is a comedienne of great charm and freshness.

Harry Belafonte

To those who saw Mr. Belafonte in the film version of "Car-

men Jones," his work in "3 For Tonight" makes it seem all the more curious that he didn't do his own singing in the picture. Of course, though, opera is not his field. He is chiefly a singer of folk ballads, which he presents with skill, feeling, an attractive romantic presence and a keen dramatic sense. It is conceivable that this sense of drama occasionally tends to get the better of him, but this is a quibble worthy only of reviewers. He is a brilliant performer and an admirable showman.

There should be a word, too, for a girl named Betty Benson. She is one of Mr. Schumann's "voices," but she also has a song of her own, which she manages admirably, and she has the additional advantage of being a bright and attractive young woman. "3 For Tonight," which, in Mr. Gregory's now familiar manner, is done on a bare stage, is not to be confused with a revue, in the usual sense of that term. It is a glorified concert, or, as the official description goes, "a diversion in song and dance." It gives us some talented people in their most talented mood.

"3 for Tonight"—continued

The New York Times

April 7, 1955

Theatre: Song and Dance Diversion

'3 For Tonight' Has Debut at Plymouth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHY is Harry Belafonte so magnificent in "3 For Tonight," which opened at the Plymouth last evening?

Probably because he is a dedicated man. Nothing interests him except the singing of a song. In this evening of improvised entertainment, Mr. Belafonte sings in various moods. There are the "work songs," including that raw epic of the Mississippi, "Mark Twain." There are spirituals, a Calypso ballad and a popular song from yesterday. Mr. Belafonte sings them in appropriate styles.

But above and beyond the styles, he represents the fanaticism of the dedicated artist. Eliminating himself, he concentrates on the songs with

fiery intensity. Although his manners are simple, his singing personality is vibrant and magnetic. Mr. Belafonte never makes a mistake in taste or musicianship, for he is all artist, and a rousing performer in any show.

"3 For Tonight" is a pretty good show in every department. As directed by Gower Champion, it dispenses with scenery and appears in the "concert form" of "Don Juan in Hell" and "John Brown's Body." Sitting at a reading lectern in the corner, Hiram Sherman, the chubby, quizzical chronicler of time, introduces the numbers and makes a few agreeable comments on the performers. The choir egregiously known as "The Voices of Walter Schumann" enters and exits carrying the stools that have made Paul Gregory famous and covers the show with melody and sound.

When Mr. Belafonte is not

singing like a prophet, Marge and Gower Champion are usually dancing, and this is something to celebrate, also. They come bearing dances in many moods, all of them attractive. They begin with a dramatic story dance about a married couple that has quarreled, carrying it off with humor and tenderness. They participate in a homely version of the Cinderella fable adapted to a Sunday school picnic in the midlands of America. In a sharp and witty number, they illustrate some musical themes; and they conclude the festivities with a charming, nostalgic version of "Harvest Moon."

As everyone knows, Mr. and Mrs. Champion are effortless dancers. But they are also people of intelligence who hate the hackneyed and despise the pretentious. "3 For Tonight" is ideal for them, and vice versa.

Granted that the new show

is original and delightful, may this column make one crotchety remark? To minstrels bent on entertaining audiences without benefit of scenery and grandiose showmanship, this column would like to say: "Quit horsing around." Especially if they come from the West Coast where show people adulate the movies, they have a weakness for looking cute and coy.

Although "3 For Tonight" has no scenery and only the simplest props, it is paradoxically over-produced. Those voices of Walter Schumann make self-conscious entrances, greet each other with mawkish smiles and sweetly condescend to the audience. Everything is a lark. The whole show is drenched with bogus kindness. The standard mannerisms of the Hollywood musical come between the material and the performers.

That is why Mr. Belafonte is so triumphant. He is completely sincere. He devotes himself exclusively to the songs. He does not play footsie with the audience. He sings.

Not to be petty about minor details, "3 For Tonight" is a thoroughly agreeable show. It's clean, in case you are looking for novelty.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

April 7, 1955

THEATER

'3 for Tonight'

By WALTER F. KERR

PRODUCER Paul Gregory doesn't need three for tonight so long as he's got Harry Belafonte for tonight.

Mr. Belafonte has been seen just once before on a Broadway stage: in last season's "Almahac." There he was backed up by some handsome but very vast settings, supported by a standard music-show orchestra, and given just two or three quick spots in which to make an impression. The impression was exciting—but in a single, eccentric, and apparently limited way.

In the new concert-style evening at the Plymouth, the lithe and flashing-eyed young singer begins by unraveling his limbs in his customary fashion—this time against a smattering of drapes, nine stools and nineteen assorted Walter Schumann voices. He slouches a shoulder and rests one hip on the air around him, grins briefly, pays no attention to a nervous knee,

clenches and unclenches his fists with spasmodic intensity. His voice, when he lets it slip out of him, is as dusty as the roads he keeps singing about—for some reason or other, it reminds me of that glazed paper that butter comes wrapped in—and while he is siphoning it through his teeth in the familiar "Mark Twain" or letting it rasp out the shattering rhythms of "When the Saints Go Marching In," it is as oddly electrifying as you remembered.

But there is more to Mr. Belafonte than that. In a jailhouse melody called "Sylvie" the contortions just stop, simplicity takes over. In a second act spiritual ("I think I heard Him say, as they was rafflin' off His clothes, 'Take my mother home'") reverence and passion are suddenly fused.

And with a last, longing sigh into the overhead microphones ("Scarlet Ribbons") the singer

makes it clear that he is more than a night-club fad. With the varied, moving, in every way brilliant performance he offers us in "Three for Tonight" Mr. Belafonte indicates that he is ready to join company with the great entertainers. This young man is an artist.

There are, of course, other performers in the reformed vaudeville that the Messrs. Gregory and Laughton have brought to town—good performers, too. Marge and Gower Champion are present and just about perfect for the light, graceful, ingratiating chores they have been called upon to do. Mrs. Champion's deadpan alarm as she discovers that her nervous reflexes are all being stimulated by a succession of musical C sharps is delightful comedy; Mr. Champion's fiercely amorous response to the sound of a flute is equally good fun. And together they set the stage spinning as a full chorus might never have done: in a breath-taking finish to "By-Play for Drums," in the burst of ragtime that pops out of a scientific "Lecture," in the soft-shoe shenanigans that come near 11 o'clock. Gower Champion has also staged the intimate evening, and he has given it an over-all air that is both sleek and friendly.

Hiram Sherman does the in-

troductions—diffident, slightly surprised, quietly superior even as he accepts a pink straw hat and a condescending invitation to dance. I do not think, however, that the simplicity and austerity of the evening would have been compromised any if some one had provided Mr. Sherman with a few professionally funny lines.

Which brings us to the fact that "Three for Tonight" is not wholly unadulterated cream. There is, for instance, a very long and very elaborate first-act finale, "Summer in Fairview Falls," which details the sale of some basket-lunches at an old-fashioned picnic. Has no one here seen "Oklahoma!"? And has some one hoped to compete in that league? The materials are stereotyped, the music and lyrics (by Walter Schumann and Robert Wells) are next to slapdash, and not even the choreography rises much above the little slavey's pirouetting with her feather duster.

The format of the show becomes predictable after a time, and you may very well feel that you'd like your variety-house turns in smaller doses, perhaps even without microphones. But there's no getting away from one thing: the power, the command, and the magnetism of the irrepressible Mr. Belafonte.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

April 7, 1955

'3 for Tonight' More Like Party

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The musical "3 for Tonight" at the Plymouth is like drinking pink champagne in a big florist's on Easter.

It makes you feel like a peppermint stick. Best of all it looks so gay and effervescent and easy, you think you can do it all yourself.

Paul Gregory Offers.

This is more of a party than a show. It all looks chic without being haughty. The Champions dance and Harry Belafonte sings. The Voices of Walter Schumann serve

as everything from a band to a dancing chorus to a choir to a good-looking back drop.

Sherman Is Host.

It was inspired to get Hiram Sherman as host. His dry wry funny comments make numbers overlap, so the show oozes happily along without interruptions. As happily, it gets along without scenery.

The Champions grow remarkably as entertainers, in all the right ways. Gower has directed the show most

inventively. In high style prancing, he is the nearest thing to Astaire since Astaire.

Marge is very pretty and feminine and in bloom looking. She has a remarkable gift for wrenching your heart or making you feel bubbly, with just a glance.

They are both so deft and swift and light. Yet they never do anything for a physical reason alone. Every movement is rife with story or emotion.

Champions Dance.

The Champions dance out with the chorus a miniature musical comedy, with all the good points, and none of the bad, of most Broadway counterparts. Then they do a lesson, read by Sherman, which is abstract enchantment, as it works up to a real-gone exposition of suppressed desires.

Above all they have charm so unusual these days.

Harry Belafonte has entered the front ranks of our modern singers. His husky voice has the soft and certain traction of crepe soles.

He sings with tension and ecstasy, always with gentleness, and always for deep-felt ideas.

Of his serious numbers, I find "Sylvie" and "Take My Mother Home" unforgettable. It is hard to believe the same fellow can wring such riot out of "The Saints Go Marching In," such comic pathos of "Matilda," or such zany delight from the final "Troubles."

Betty Benson of the Voices has a lovely interlude, in that eerie sweet-breathy soprano of hers. And all the cast dances.

A Rare Show.

Champion has made gala parades of the chorus exits and entrances. As the evening picks up its festive spirit, he gets Sherman involved in a soft shoe.

And several times Belafonte foregoes his stance of crumpled power, half Radio City Atlas, half Ed Sullivan, and prances around like a pro.

This "3 for Tonight" is one of those rare shows that is in a class by itself.

Journal American

April 7, 1955

Great Talent In a Sure Hit

Marge and Gower Champion,
And Belafonte Head Fine Cast

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT IS difficult to define just what Paul Gregory has produced in "3 for Tonight" which opened at the Plymouth Theatre last night. It is not theatre in the sense that any effort has been made toward formalized settings, it is bigger than a night club act because there are more people spread over a greater area, it isn't a vest pocket revue because the pocket's too plush. But it is really great.

The technique is so simple that one wonders why it hasn't been done a hundred times before. A guy named Hiram Sherman, who is very good at this sort of thing in a kind of Bob Benchley way, comes on-stage and tells you that he has some people here to entertain you.

He doesn't make any claims or brag about "the greatest singers of songs" but, pretty soon a large number of prepossessing young men and women appear and come close to convincing you that they ARE the greatest. These are The Voices of Walter Schumann.

Engaging Couple

Sherman, not to be confused with Schumann, then reappears and introduces you to Marge and Gower Champion who are easily the most engaging dance couple in the land. Their specialty is precision, and they open with an item tuned to the beat of a clock. You've probably seen them here and there and if you have they'll win you again; if you haven't you'll have a bright new experience in life.

These two don't really look like professional dancers; they seem to be a happily fond couple having a good time, and they will eventually bring tears to your eyes with their finale at the close of the first act.

But I am getting ahead of the other most important feature of the proceedings: Harry Belafonte. Mr. Sherman introduces him graciously and again with a minimum of the usual platitudes, and he quickly pulverizes the audience.

He has a true and reasonably powerful voice, but he has the added attributes of style and showmanship, and great good looks. He gives you the

memorable "Mark Twain" from "Almanac" and finishes with a big production rendition of "When The Saints Go Marching By" which doesn't leave a pale palm in the audience.

Same Pattern

The second part of the festivities follow the same pattern, with Sherman sliding in and out and the chorus supplying background while the Champions and Belafonte make their changes. You will enjoy, particularly, Belafonte's "Noah," "Take My Mother Home" and the impact of the entire company in "Matilda" and the concluding "By The Light of the Silvery Moon" and "Shine on, Harvest Moon."

Once more Mr. Gregory has managed to finesse the unions. The props consist mostly of stools and other small movable objects and the chorus carries them on and offstage; the lighting is simple and effective; the costumes are pleasant and unostentatious.

But the talent is enormous; this is an unquestioned hit.